

O 031428Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5660
INFO ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY
CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY
HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
CDR USSOCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000868

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
NSC FOR ABRAMS/MCDERMOTT
PARIS FOR WALLER
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [FR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG REPORTEDLY RECONSIDERING EXCHANGE OF
AMBASSADORS WITH LEBANON BY YEAR'S END

REF: DAMASCUS 863

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) In the wake of the visit of French President Sarkozy's advisors (reftel), diplomats in Damascus are sensing that the SARG may be preparing to renege on its commitment to exchange ambassadors with Lebanon and to open embassies in each other's capital by year's end. According to Spanish Ambassador Juan Serrat (protect), the SARG has slowed down the ambassadorial selection process because of its unhappiness with recent developments on the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The SARG reportedly believed that the French had agreed to slowball the Tribunal, in part to avoid any possible embarrassment for the SARG in terms of the Tribunal's lines of inquiry and in part because, Serrat argued, the Tribunal's inquiries would also exacerbate tensions among Lebanese factions. With the news that the Tribunal may be entering a new, more active stage in March, 2009, the SARG reportedly believes that they have been let down by the French and should therefore slow down their own implementation of commitments reach during Sarkozy's September visit to Damascus.

¶2. (C) Turkish Ambassador Halit Cevik (protect), who enjoys good access to SARG officials, was more inclined to blame the delays in naming an ambassador on bureaucratic inefficiencies and tangled relationships. Noting that, in his experience, even decisions made at the Presidential level can be subject to long delays in execution, Cevik argued that the Syrian MFA has only a thin layer of talent -- essentially Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad and Deputy Foreign Minister Abdel Fatah Ammourah -- who would be qualified for the Beirut post. When the search is widened beyond career diplomats, he said, there is still a limited pool of possible nominees. Added to that is the SARG's continued debate over the best personal and religious profile (Christian, Sunni, etc). All these factors make the SARG decision-making process even more glacially-slow than usual.

¶3. (C) Serrat told Charge that he believes that Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa is attempting to use the ambassadorial selection process as a means of weakening Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim. Muallim is closely identified with the rapprochement process with France and other European countries, a trend that Sharaa has not avidly supported. With disappointment (and potentially anxiety) over the Tribunal developments, Sharaa and "other hard-liners" have argued with some success that "Syria would be giving something away for nothing" if it were to appoint the ambassador before year's end. Moreover, Serrat speculated, the SARG now believes that making such an important gesture by the end of December would be wasted,

given that the new U.S. administration would not yet be in office and a new Israeli government would not have been elected and formed. The French, according to Serrat, delivered a tougher message than they had shared with us (reftel) and had told the SARG that if the ambassadors were not named by December 14, the EU Association Agreement deal could be in jeopardy. Even if the parties still signed it (the EU deputy external affairs commissioner is due in Damascus for the occasion), the ratification process would be negatively affected by the SARG's failure to keep its side of the bargain. In reaction, the SARG hard-liners are supposed to be arguing that an EU Association Agreement that provides limited developmental assistance (approx. 30 million Euros, according to Serrat) is hardly an adequate trade for Syria formally relinquishing its claims to territory they believe is historically part of Syria. This latter argument, Serrat said, is a line of reasoning also being pushed by the Russian Ambassador in Damascus.

¶4. (C) Comment: As Serrat points out, the sudden visit by Sarkozy's foreign policy advisors would indicate a sense of urgency on the part of the French regarding the Lebanon commitments. For months after Sarkozy's September 4 visit, both Syrian officials and foreign diplomats waved aside questions regarding the SARG's intention to come through on its commitment. It seems now that serious doubts have arisen and, as the hard-liners reportedly argue, the EU Association Agreement may not provide sufficient leverage to overcome the SARG's inclination to raise the price for good behavior on Lebanon. Suggestions that further progress on Lebanon (and presumably other regional issues) may have to wait for the formation of a new Israeli government are particularly worrisome and open the way for counter-productive Syrian behavior regarding the Tribunal, the IAEA consideration of the Al-Kibar issue, Palestinian reconciliation, and Lebanese elections. From our vantage point, we cannot assess whether there are also delays on the Lebanese side that may be playing into Syrian decision-making.

CONNELLY